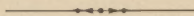


Green (S. A.)

The First Census of Massachusetts.



BY THE HON. SAMUEL A. GREEN, M.D.

Librarian of the Massachusetts Historical Society.



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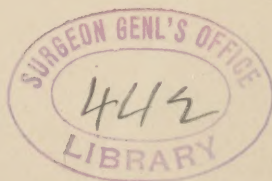
THE FIRST CENSUS OF MASSACHUSETTS.

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BY THE HON. SAMUEL A. GREEN, M.D.

LIBRARIAN OF THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

The earliest census of Massachusetts was taken during the Provincial period under great difficulties. Before that time, it is true, on various occasions, there had been collected certain statistics which embraced the number of families or of polls, or other minor inquiries, but there had not been previously a general enumeration of all the inhabitants.

On June 2, 1763, Governor Francis Bernard sent a message to the General Court, expressing his wish that a census of the Province might be taken; but that body paid no heed to the suggestion. It was under his administration that an attempt to enforce the Writs of Assistance had previously been made, and this rendered him unpopular among the sturdy yeomanry with whom he had no sympathy. On January 19, 1764, the Governor renewed the proposition, apparently with better success, for the Legislature, on February 2, adopted an order carrying out his wishes. The popular heart, however, was



not in the work, and no public interest was felt in the measure. The people were suspicious of the rulers in England, and jealous of all political interference, and naturally the census proceeded slowly. On March 5, 1765, an Act was passed by the General Court to carry into effect an order which had already been passed for numbering the people within the Province. This supplementary action shows that the Governor's pet scheme was not receiving a warm support.

With these drawbacks, and under such conditions, the first official registration of the number of people in the Province of Massachusetts Bay ever made was finished in the year 1765. It included as well the number of families, the number of boys and girls under sixteen years of age, the number of men and of women, and also of negroes. Singularly enough, there are now no traces or returns of this enumeration among the State archives, where they were undoubtedly placed. How or when they disappeared is a matter of conjecture, but probably they were lost amid the confusion that naturally and necessarily prevailed during the Revolution. Fortunately, a copy of this census was found by the late Judge Samuel Dana, of Groton, among some papers of a deceased friend, which had then lately come into his possession; and by him sent to the *Columbian Centinel* (Boston), where it was printed for the first time in the issue of August 17, 1822, more than half a century after the enumeration was made. From this source is derived all the information we have concerning the figures of that early census; and the printed copy, in the absence of any other, is an authority second in importance only to the original manuscript returns.

In his letter to the editor of the *Centinel*, Judge Dana suggests that the copy — presumably the original document — after it was printed should be sent to the Antiquarian Society for preservation in its library. If he meant by this name the American Antiquarian Society at Worcester, it appears not

to have been done. Some years ago, at my request, a careful search for the missing manuscript was made by the librarian, but without success; and no record of the document is now found among the accessions of that period. After it had been used as "copy" by the printers, it probably was thrown away.

In the early days of library management, loose manuscripts and other papers were not guarded with that care which they now receive, and consequently were more liable to be lost. I mention this fact because once these census returns were probably in the possession of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Among some gifts made to the Historical Library by the Reverend Dr. James Freeman, on April 9, 1791, is a "List of Inhabitants in the Province of Massachusetts Bay, in 1764 and 1765" (*Proceedings*, I. 8), which does not appear in the Society's catalogue published in the year 1811, nor is there now any clew to it. The catalogue of 1796 does not give the separate manuscripts, so that it affords no help in the matter. Perhaps this list was taken out from the library by a member at some time between the years 1791 and 1811, and was not returned. Subsequently, it may have drifted into Judge Dana's hands, and thus found its way to the public through the columns of the *Centinel*.

Akin to this subject, there is now in the Historical Society's library a memorandum-book of forty-five pages which contains some interesting facts connected directly or indirectly with the population of the Commonwealth during the revolutionary period. Mr. Felt, a former librarian, evidently used it in preparing an article on the population of Massachusetts, published in the first volume of the "Collections of the American Statistical Association" (Boston, 1847). In his paper Mr. Felt gives nearly all the statistics found in the memorandum-book, and speaks of it as "a manuscript of credible authority" (page 157), though without mentioning it more specifically. The number of white persons within

the State in the year 1776, and the number of polls in 1778 and 1781, as well as other statistical facts, are also given, though it is not known by whom the record was made. It furnishes a few items of some value for comparison with later enumerations.

In compliance with a resolution of Congress, an Act was passed by the General Court, on July 2, 1784, requiring the assessors of towns, districts, and plantations to make certain returns, such as the quantity of land within their respective limits, and the number of buildings thereon, distinguishing dwelling-houses from other buildings, and the number of inhabitants of all ages and sexes, distinguishing white from black. These returns were to be made before the first day of the ensuing November. While they are meagre by the side of those of more modern times, they are of interest in connection with subsequent returns.

The first enumeration of the Commonwealth, under a national census, was taken in 1790, and even then the statistical returns were scanty. A comparison of this census with the one of last year shows many marked changes in the relative position of towns in their size and importance. Take certain places in Middlesex County, for instance, and compare them in their population with the same places of today; and the result is suggestive. At that time Cambridge was the largest town in the county, and Groton came next. Cambridge had 355 families, numbering 2115 persons; and Groton had 322 families, numbering 1840 persons. Charlestown had a population of 1583, and Newton 1360. Reading, with 341 families (19 more than Groton), numbered 1802 persons (38 less than Groton). Woburn then had a population of 1727, Framingham 1598, Marlborough 1554, and Waltham 882. Pepperell contained 1132 inhabitants, Shirley 677, Westford 1229, and Littleton 854. There were at that time in the county 41 towns, which number has since been increased to 46 towns and 8 cities; and in the meanwhile Brighton and Charles-

town have been merged in the municipality of Boston, and thus have lost their separate existence. The county today contains more cities than any other within the limits of the Commonwealth. They are eight in number, and, according to their municipal seniority, as follows: Lowell, Cambridge, Somerville, Newton, Malden, Waltham, Woburn, and Marlborough. Essex County comes next with six cities, as follows: Salem, Lynn, Newburyport, Lawrence, Haverhill, and Gloucester.

